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THE PLANS OF THE ILLINOIS STATE HISTORICAL LIBRARY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE CARE OF PUBLIC ARCHIVES.

By Evarts Boutell Greene.

The Illinois State Historical Society is, by the provisions of various acts of the General Assembly, placed substantially in the position of a State Department of History. In the exercise of this responsibility, it is, like other State departments, very largely dependent upon the support which it is able to secure from an intelligent public opinion. I desire, therefore, to ask your attention, as members of the State Historical Society and as citizens, for a brief account of the work which the Trustees of the State Historical Library are trying to do.

The first and most familiar business of the Library Board is the collection of material for the history of Illinois. These materials are partly printed books, especially the documents in which we get our first hand evidence for the establishment of historical facts. The Library, must also, however, collect that large mass of historical material which has not yet been printed but which is to be found in the State and federal archives of the United States, and in the great public collections of those European powers which have had a part in the colonization of the New World. There is, of course, also much valuable manuscript material in private possession, such as the personal correspondence of men who have been leaders in politics, religion or industry. Sometimes the Library acquires the original material as in the case of the Lincoln manuscripts, or such a collection as the Pierre Menard Papers now being repaired and bound. In many cases, however, the original manuscripts themselves can not be secured and we must content ourselves

with copies. The Library has, within recent years, secured a large number of transcripts of papers in America and abroad relating to the history of Illinois and the Northwest in general. In other cases where it is not even practicable to secure copies, the Library has undertaken, either independently or in co-operation with others, the preparation of calendars or inventories which will enable the student to know the exact nature of the material to be found in any given place. For instance, the Trustees of the State Historical Library have recently agreed to co-operate with other historical agencies in the Mississippi Valley in the preparation of a calendar of the documents in the French Archives relating to the discovery and exploration of the Mississippi Valley.

Besides collecting books and manuscripts, the State Historical Library is also charged with the duty of publishing historical documents. In the opinion of the Trustees, the Library publications should, for the present at least, consist mainly of the original documents rather than of historical essays or monographs. It will be quite evident to any one who studies the matter seriously that our State and local histories will never be satisfactory until the original documents have been printed on a much larger scale than has been possible hitherto. Most historians have contented themselves with copying each other, that is to say, they have been willing to accept hearsay evidence. The true historian, however, like the judge or the lawyer, seeks for first hand evidence. That is what the historian means by going to the sources, and it is only by this going to the sources that real progress in historical knowledge is possible. On the basis of the material thus made accessible through publication, we may expect the members of this Society and other students gradually to build up a history of Illinois really worthy of the achievements of her people.

The results of this work of publication by the Library proper as distinguished from the State Historical Society,

are to be seen chiefly in the volumes of the Illinois Historical Collections of which the first volume, edited by Hon. H. W. Beckwith, was issued in 1903. Since then there have appeared volumes on the Cahokia and Kaskaskia records, edited by Professor C. W. Alvord of the University of Illinois, and throwing a flood of light on the life of the old French villages in the Illinois country; two volumes of Governor's Letter-Books to the year 1853; and a valuable bibliography of Illinois newspapers. There are now nearly ready for issue three other important volumes. The first of these, edited by Professor J. A. James of Northwestern University, will be the first volume in what is likely to prove the definitive edition of the papers of George Rogers Clark;¹ a second of these publications will contain a bibliography of works of travel relating to Illinois, prepared by Dr. S. J. Buck of the University of Illinois; and a third also nearly ready for the press will contain correspondence of the famous trader, George Morgan, and other material for the history of Illinois during the British period, collected and edited by Professors Alvord and Carter.

Besides building up the Library and publishing historical documents, the Trustees have recently interested themselves in another important field of work, namely the care of public archives. The last General Assembly made an appropriation of \$2,500 for the purpose of securing an inspection of county and other local archives under the direction of the Library Board. By means of this grant, the Board has been enabled to employ agents who have inspected the archives of more than seventy counties. A careful card catalogue of the series of records found in these various depositories has been prepared and is now in the possession of the State Historical Library. It has been found that though some counties have provided adequately for the preservation of their records, others are exposing valuable documents to the

¹ Since the presentation of this paper, this volume has been published.

danger of loss by fire or otherwise. It is evident that the birth and death records of many counties are very incomplete and the same is true of marriages. Another unfortunate feature of our local records, though not of course at all peculiar to Illinois is the failure to exercise proper care in the use of paper and ink with the result that records of real importance are often kept on perishable material.

The Trustees have recommended that this appropriation be renewed in order that the records of the remaining counties and of the more important cities and towns may be investigated, and the results published. It is proposed to include in this final report an account of what has been done by other states for the improvement of local archives, and some proposals for legislation with a view to securing better standards in these matters. It is believed that the importance of an orderly keeping of public archives will be appreciated not only by historical students but quite as much by that large body of practical men, lawyers, business men, land owners and others, who have a direct interest in the accurate keeping of legal records.

Though a few of the oldest and most valuable historical records may, in accordance with the provisions of an existing law, be transferred from local archives to the State Historical Library and should so far as practicable be so transferred, it is evident that the great bulk of this material must always remain in the possession of the local authorities. On the other hand, the public archives of the State must always be gathered at the capital. At present these records are in the possession of the various departments of the State government of which the most important for this purpose is the office of the Secretary of State. It has been evident for a long time that it is difficult for the departments, burdened as they necessarily are, with the demands of current business, to find adequate storage and filing arrangements for the older records.

In many cases, records of great value for the history of the State have been distributed in inconvenient and unsafe parts of the Capitol building, where they are exposed to partial or complete loss by dirt, dampness, and other causes. It must be remembered also that the capitol building is not fire-proof and that we are in constant danger of a fire like that in Albany which destroyed immense masses of valuable historical manuscripts which can never be replaced.² Can we as citizens of Illinois afford to take that risk? Can we consider ourselves really loyal to our great traditions if we neglect to preserve the records of those who have gone before us?

It is the opinion of the Library Board that, as soon as possible, the Legislature should provide a suitable structure for housing that part of the public archives which is not needed for the transaction of current business. With the approval of the Governor, an inspection of the archives was made in 1912 by Mr. W. G. Leland, an expert archivist. Mr. Leland prepared a valuable statement which is to be included in the forthcoming report of the Educational Building Commission. In this report it is clearly shown that the collection of historical material from the various departments will be of advantage not only to investigators, but to the departments themselves by relieving the latter of the responsibility for taking care of documents no longer used in the actual transaction of business, thus enabling them to provide more adequate space for their current files. The testimony of State officials in the neighboring state of Iowa where the experiment has been tried seems to show that it is working well. In response to my inquiry, Hon. W. C. Hayward, Secretary of State of Iowa wrote in February, 1912, as follows:

"In reference to this I will say briefly that I am of the opinion that the action of the General Assembly in

² See for a comprehensive account of the condition of the Illinois archives, Alvord and Pease, *The Archives of the State of Illinois*, American Hist. Assn. Annual Report 1909, pp. 383-463.

establishing this department was wise and well taken. The vaults of the various departments of state were becoming well filled with papers and documents worthy of preservation, but not catalogued nor indexed as they should be to be of ready reference and the room they occupied was being needed for papers and documents of later date. Under proper classification and index in the archives department, they are in shape for ready reference and in a great many cases these documents are of no small value, not only in a historical way, but in settling questions that arise from time to time. In turning over the old papers and documents that occupied the vault in this department there has been no inconvenience arising whatever. If it is desired to look up some matter pertaining to transactions that occurred a long while ago, it is less trouble to find the desired papers in the archives department than it would be if they had been left here; then it gives more room, which was much needed for filing away papers and documents that are accumulating day by day. I do not know of any friction whatsoever between the archives department and any of the departments of state. I am sure it is proving a great convenience and will be of growing value as the years go by."

Now it is true that at present we are not alone in our failure to face this problem squarely. There is hardly a state in the Union which is doing any thing like its duty in this respect, if we compare their practice with that of the best European archives. Even the government at Washington has been a serious offender. In a recent article in the *American Historical Review*, on "The National Archives," Mr. Waldo G. Leland points out that many of our national records are in the most undignified and unsuitable places "in cellars and sub-cellars, and under terraces, in attics and over porticos, in corridors and closed-up doorways, piled in heaps upon the floor, or crowded into alcoves" or worse still, "farmed out and stored in such rented structures as abandoned car barns, storage warehouses, deserted theaters, or ancient but

more humble edifices that should long ago have served their last useful purpose.’”³ But better standards are coming. In the closing hours of the last session of Congress, the Omnibus Public Building Act was passed with provisions looking toward the erection of a National Archive building in the city of Washington. The Secretary of the Treasury was directed, “after inspection of the best modern national archive buildings in Europe, and consultation with the best authorities there, to prepare designs and estimates for a fire-proof building containing not less than three million cubic feet of space, upon a lot of land large enough to contain ultimately a building three times that size.”⁴

Several of the states are moving in a similar direction. What sort of a place is Illinois going to have in this movement towards decency and order in the care of public records? It is very well to talk about patriotic respect for the memory of our fathers who made the State what it is today. But do we really care? If we do, it is time for something better than sentimental speeches; it is time we passed from words to action.

Now just what can we do, what is really practicable under existing conditions? The ideal thing would be a building devoted to the historical interests alone, including the library now disgracefully over-crowded, the society and a suitable hall of archives. To such a hall of archives, under the management of an expert and practical archivist should be transferred, *with the approval in each case of the head of the department concerned*, the kinds of material in the various departments which are no longer needed in the transaction of current business and which, not being used, may be a positive inconvenience to the men who have to meet the practical demands of the public from day to day. Under competent management many papers so transferred will be made for the first time

³ American Historical Review, Oct., 1912.

⁴ Ibid., April, 1913.

readily accessible to historical scholars and to many others whose interests are purely practical.

If, as it now appears, we can not secure this ideal arrangement, then let us try to complete by the year 1918, which will be the centennial of the admission of Illinois to the Union, an educational building which shall provide not only for the archives and for our historical interests generally, but also for the department of education and for the scientific collections now in the museum. How can we better mark the progress of the State in civilization than by such a monument as this? It is by our failure or success in meeting such responsibilities that our standing as a civilized community will in a large measure be judged. Shall we lead the line of march or shall we struggle to the rear?